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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/I

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KTER](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PRT KARBALA: ATTACKS DURING ARBA'IN LEAVE 56 DEAD

REF: A. BAGHDAD 0224
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 0296

Classified By: PRT Karbala Team Leader John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Karbala reporting cable.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY: Fears of violence in Karbala during Arba'in (reftel A) were realized after four deadly attacks left 56 dead and more than two hundred wounded among the several million visitors to the event, culminating on February 4. All four attacks used vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) and occurred on roads leading into the city from al-Hillah. Local officials blamed the attacks on "Ba'athists" and al-Qaida. Karbalans remain concerned about the chances for increased violence ahead of next month's elections. END SUMMARY.

FOUR DEADLY ATTACKS

[1](#)3. (C) Iraqi security force (ISF) reports confirmed two VBIED attacks on February 3 along a main route leading into Karbala. The attacks killed 25 and wounded more than one hundred. The second two attacks February 5, initially reported as mortar fire, used two VBIEDs about one half mile apart and left 31 dead and 118 wounded. ISF sources confirmed that all four attacks occurred in an area under the responsibility of a single Iraqi Army commander, who USF-I interlocutors characterized as generally effective. Local officials blamed the attacks on al-Qaida and "Ba'athists." (NOTE: Local press reported that Karbala Governor Amal al-Din (Da'wa) attributed the second two attacks to "mortar fire." One local PRT employee speculated that this might be an effort by the ISF to divert blame away from a more preventable VBIED attack to one much less easy to combat. END NOTE.) Another PRT local employee reported that the Governor planned to blame any attacks on the "Ba'athist threat," even if there was evidence that the perpetrators were Shi'a militia.

EXTENSIVE SECURITY PLAN IMPLEMENTED

[1](#)4. (C) Iraqi media reported an extensive plan for the February 4 Arba'in commemoration by security officials, incorporating Karbala and the surrounding provinces. The plan included deployment of more than 30,000 forces, increased checkpoints, 1,500 females employed to conduct searches, use of undercover personnel, installation of surveillance cameras, and Iraqi and U.S. Air Force air support. Security operations began ten days in advance of Arba'in, which caused grumbling among security personnel over denied leaves during the event, according to a PRT local employee with relatives in the security forces.

¶5. (C) Media reports announced the personal participation of Prime Minister al-Maliki and the Minister of Interior, Jawad al-Bolani in developing the security plans for the event. (COMMENT: While Maliki hails from Karbala province and is a somewhat regular visitor for a variety of political and personal reasons, this was a rare visit during one of Karbala's religious events for Bolani, perhaps an indication of the level of seriousness given to the planning or his own electioneering on behalf of his Coalition of Iraq,s Unity. END COMMENT.)

¶6. The Karbala Police Chief, Ali Jassim al-Greri, criticized the media during a press conference on January 28 for creating an uproar over the use of handheld explosive detecting devices, stating "this is just noise to negatively affect the security preparations for Arba'iniyah. We have tested these devices and the results were very good." (NOTE: The director of the UK manufacturer of the devices was recently arrested for fraud, resulting in significant Iraqi Qrecently arrested for fraud, resulting in significant Iraqi media attention on the devices used at many checkpoints around the country. The timing of the controversy was especially harmful to perceptions of security on the eve of this major religious event. END NOTE)

COMMENT: CONFIDENCE SHIFTS

¶7. (C) Initial confidence in the Arba'in security plans was strong, with PRT local employees reporting larger crowds in attendance than previous years and significant increases in foreign visitors, especially Iranians and Kuwaitis. Local officials launched a regular and detailed media plan to inform the public about the security measures taken. The attacks during Arba,in, while disturbing, fall within the amount of violence associated with major Shi,a commemorations post-2003. While an Arba'iniyyah unmarred by violence would have been a huge plus for Maliki and the ISF, the fact that matters were not worse is probably a political "wash." The attacks have raised concerns for more violence ahead of next month's elections. Blaming the Ba,athists for the attacks will add to already negative feelings about Iraqi judicial decisions to include certain "Ba'athist" electoral candidates (reftel B).
HILL